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Slamdance Film Festival 2012 Report

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Abstract
This is the report on films reviewed at the Slamdance Film Festival, held in Park City, Utah in January 2012.

Author Notes
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In addition to our coverage of the Sundance Film Festival each January, we also are invited to cover the films shown at the Slamdance Film Festival held at the Treasure Mountain Inn in Park City, Utah at the same time as the Sundance Film Festival (SFF).

The Slamdance Film Festival is now in its eighteenth year and while it is not as large as the SFF, it offers an opportunity to see both feature length films and short films that would be of interest to our readers. Below you will find our reviews of movies from Slamdance.

We especially want to thank Kelly Weaver and Ashley Tecson and all of the people at Matt Johnstone Publicity for making our job much easier than it would otherwise be.
DeafBlind

a film directed by Ewan Bailey
Narrative Short

A woman who is both deaf and blind lives alone. She is able to communicate with her priest by tapping code on his hand. Likewise he taps code on her hand to communicate. The priest tells the woman that he is worried about her—he does not like the fact that she lives alone. The woman tells the priest that he need not worry because she knows that Jesus is living in the house with her. The priest asks her how she knows that it is Jesus and she says that she "feels his presence."

One day when the woman returns home and puts away her coat and groceries, the audience discovers that there is indeed a young man in the house with her — a young many she cannot see or hear. Is this Jesus? The movie does not tell us. He could be some pervert who has become obsessed by the woman. He is there in the house with her much of the time. She cannot see or hear him. He watches her and we do not know his intentions. We do know that when she rolls an orange down the counter he catches it and keeps it from falling on the floor. And when he catches the orange, we notice that two of his fingers have been cut off at the second knuckle.

The woman is very lonely. She has no companionship because she can neither see nor hear. The priest is the only person we know of that can communicate with her. Because she is lonely she signs up for a "disabled dating site." She thinks that no one has responded to her participation in the site, but we see that the young man in her house has taken all of the responses and kept them from her. Finally, the young man lets her respond to a man who is also both deaf and blind. When the deaf/blind man comes over, he wants sex. But the woman does not, so the deaf/blind man gets up to leave and when he does the woman takes his hand and leads him to her bedroom where he very roughly has sex with her, satisfying himself, but showing no regard for the woman. All the time the young man who watches is in the house.

Has the woman sinned? She has let a man use her, without any reciprocal satisfaction--not even the companionship she so desperately seeks. If she has sinned, then we can interpret the young man as taking the woman's sin unto himself, thereby absolving her of her sin and providing a kind of salvation. The young man is not crucified, but instead he chops off a third finger at the second knuckle. We can see this as his sacrifice on behalf of the woman. Maybe Jesus really is living in the house with the woman after all.
Maxine Peake gives a stunning performance and we are terrified that the stranger will harm her. But, then his sacrifice allows us to interpret him as a savior figure — the Jesus she told the priest was living in her house.

— William L. Blizek

_Eileen Pratt_

a film directed by Michael Kratochvil

Narrative Short

Many religions have a concept of rebirth or being born again as an essential feature of their theologies. This is a movie about the rebirth of Eileen Pratt.

We first meet Eileen sitting in the vibrating chair available to shoppers at the mall. Then we see her sitting alone on a bench, again in the mall. She is watching a couple in a public display of affection. She looks at them longingly — clearly she is all alone and very lonely. We see her sitting on the bench until the mall closes, after which she goes home to an empty house where her only companion is a cat, but the cat is independent and standoffish, not a lap cat. The mall plays an important role in this film.

We learn that Eileen is a bus driver, but at work she is ignored by her fellow bus drivers and she is separated from the passengers by a plastic shield. She sees a young woman with an infant get on the bus. She watches the woman with a look of longing. The loneliness is heartbreaking.

When Eileen gets into an accident with the bus, she is fired, denying her the last connection she has with others. Again we see her alone in the mall, where she watches the cleaning lady throw trash in a wastebasket. (Trash receptacles are an important part of the story.) She then slips into an employee hallway and here we see her slapping her own face multiple times — an exercise in self-abuse. Even Eileen treats Eileen badly.

When we next see Eileen, she is leaving the house and walking along the sidewalk. We learn that she is looking for a garbage bin that is empty. When she finds one she dives into it head first. In the bin she has a vision of her mother coming to get her, and then we see her mother carrying Eileen in a blanket through the mall until she finds a waste disposal can, where she leaves the baby Eileen in the trash. Eileen has been abandoned (dumped) by her mother and now we see the truck pick up the bin and empty it into the truck. The truck then takes the bin to the landfill and again Eileen is dumped into the trash.

But after a short time, Eileen rises up from the trash heap, and although she is dirty and disheveled, she runs away from the dump. Writer/director, Michael Kratochvil said that he hoped
that people would see the film as uplifting. Even though Eileen has been abandoned by her mother and lives a bleak life with no friends, she leaves the dump reborn, with new opportunities, new possibilities, and hope for the future. We do not know what happens to Eileen, but we do know that she has been reborn and that no matter how bleak the circumstances rebirth is possible.

— William L. Blizek

Far From Him, Towards Him

a film directed by Javad Rezaei Monfared
Made in Iran

A father and son stopped talking to each other six years ago over religious differences. The son was no longer interested in his religion, while the father went on to become a servant at one of the famous holy shrines in the religious city of Qum. The son learns that he is dying of lung cancer and although "far from him" in spirit, he sets out to find and reconcile with his father (towards him). He goes to one of the shrines and asks people to look at a picture of his father. Have they seen this man? Do they know where he might be? One of the people asked to look at the picture of his father, tells the man to go see the holy woman, but the man replies that he isn't into that. The other man's response is: "Oh, that's the problem," meaning that it is the man's lack of religion or faith that is preventing him from finding his father.

Eventually, someone tells the man that he can find his father at the famous holy shrine. But, as he travels toward the shrine he finds that he is unable to see the shrine, the shrine that everyone else sees quite easily and clearly. Why can't the man see the shrine? He needs to find the shrine in order to find his father and he needs to find his father before he dies. But, as one man says, he cannot see the shrine because he does not say his prayers. The message of the movie is that we cannot do important things without faith. Without faith, the man cannot see the shrine, cannot find his father, cannot reconcile with his father before he dies. One's faith is important to how we live our lives, whatever our faith may be, it is important to living well.

— William L. Blizek
The Kook

A film by directed by Gregory Mitnick, Nat Livingston Johnson
Narrative Short

The Kook is a quirky little comedy about a group of people who follow a charismatic leader, Do, who appears to them in the woods in the form of an apparition or a hologram--thing Princess Leia here. The group seems to be an odd lot--kooks if you will. They dress alike in yellow sweat suits and meet in the woods to hear from Do. Do tells them that he will take them all to another realm or another dimension when the time is right. All they have to do is disconnect from their earthly lives, which they can do by burying all of their money and valuables at a designated place in the woods. Sound familiar? After they have buried their worldly goods, they will each drink from a drink box of some kind in preparation for leaving this earth and joining Do in another world.

By accident, one of the kooks, Fa, discovers that Do is a fraud, that there is poison in the drink boxes (sound familiar?), and that Do plans to dig up the their buried treasure and make off with it after they have all died. Since only Do knows where the treasure is buried, he can go back after the tragedy and find the treasure.

But Fa confronts Do and Do is killed as he tries to kill Fa. Fa tries to convince the others that the juice is poisoned and that Do is a fraud, but the group is unpersuaded, wanting so badly what Do has told them he will do for them. Finally, Fa, dresses up like Do and makes an appearance to the group in the woods via a satellite dish and speaking as Do, convinces them to pour out the juice instead of drinking it and tells them that he can no longer take them to another realm because one of them was an unbeliever. But, Fa has saved the day, even if she has to do it pretending to be an angry Do.

While this is a quirky film with lots of humor, the message is clear: Beware of those who ask for your loyalty and your money in return for giving you some special reward. The movie mirrors a lot of religious figures and organizations that want your money and cannot fulfill their promises.

There is one particular feature of the film worth noting here. Do regularly tells his followers: "I love you." Clearly he does not mean this, since he is planning to have them all die and to take their money. But, when Fa is acting as though she were Do, she too says: "I love you." And in this case she clearly means it. We should never be fooled by religious figures who tell us they love us. It is an easy thing to say and we may feel good when someone tells us he or she loves us, but it takes more than talk to love.

(For an interesting comparison, see Sound of my Voice, reviewed in last year's Report From Sundance.) — William L. Blizek
This extraordinary short film consists of a trio of vignettes – a cinematic triptych – depicting a series of interrelated beings (and perhaps universes). The subjects of each undergo a remarkable transformation. First, a pair of women rock back and forth as life in the form of vegetation, vines, and colorful tendrils explodes out of them and around them, eventually making them one complex mass of living matter. In the second, eel-like creatures float through the dark, communicating by sparks of light and audible blips. Their activity increases until they gather in what seems to be a single complex organism. In the final sequence, two men with circular painted designs on their faces and stomachs face off. Suddenly the designs start to pour through their bodies like sand through a funnel. The streams of sand shoot in beams toward each other. When they collide, the explosioncourses through them – and simultaneously through the other two entities as well.

The three scenes seem to play out an arc of creation, growth, and destruction, and the various visual details that tie the three together suggest the Hindu concept that these aspects of life are all dimensions of Brahman, the true, sacred reality that underlies all apparent difference and separateness. In the Q&A after its showing, filmmaker Andrew Huang referenced some Buddhist influences on his score (which he composed) and acknowledged that the vignette with the draining sand was meant to evoke Tibetan sand mandalas. These designs, painstakingly created by monks to encapsulate the universe in a visual pattern, then are dispersed to demonstrate its impermanence. Despite its own unique and idiosyncratic symbolism (essentially the definition of “solipsism”) to represent three separate worlds, Huang’s film portrays the opposite: the undeniable interconnectedness of all things through the processes of creation, growth, and destruction.

— Dereck Daschke

Lessons for the Living

One of the fun things about being in Park City during the film festivals is that you never know whom you will meet or where you will meet them. In this case I ran into director Lily Henderson in the line for a Slamdance reception. While chatting, I learned that Lily had recently done a movie on hospice care, entitled, Lessons for the Living. She gave me a copy and since one of the most important things that religion makes available to us is an understanding of death, I thought that Lily's movie might be of interest to many of our readers. My review follows.
Lily gave me the 24 minute version of the movie.* It includes interviews with five different hospice volunteers, each of whom offers a different perspective on dying. Maeling, a social worker, sees how frightening death can be. "I see how commonly people dread death . . .," she says, "there has got to be another way." Hospice care provides that other way. Mark, a high school student, sees that some people deceive themselves about aging and death--they tell themselves that they are not growing older and that they are not going to die. Then there are those who do not deceive themselves. The latter are much better equipped to deal with death. Leon, a retired Rabbi, has been told that at the end there is nothing left. But in Leon's experience, there is always the possibility that "something happens between two people that is transcendent." Kristen, a personal assistant, finds that her patient has died. The choir comes by to sing to the patient and when they find out that the patient has died, they decide to sing to her anyway. As the choir sings, Kristen finds herself living for the people who are no longer living. Kathleen has been a hospice volunteer for many years, and she now finds herself in hospice care. "Volunteering," she says, "takes away all the mystery about dying."

It is interesting to me that almost all narrative films about heaven or life after death focus, not upon what heaven will be like, but rather they focus upon how we should live our lives. This documentary film is no different--thus the title, Lessons for the Living. As people reach the end of life they do not seem to be particularly concerned with what lies beyond--will they go to heaven or hell, will they meet God, and so on. They are mostly interested in remembering how they have lived their lives. Have they made some contribution to the world they are about to leave? If they are satisfied with how they have lived their lives, what lies beyond seems not very important. At the end of life, religion seems less important, even though religion has much to say about death and what follows death. In this film that message is given in a statement by Elisabeth Kübler Ross:

"We run after values that, at death, become zero . . . .
That's what dying patients teach you."

Making a movie about death and dying is a difficult thing to do. There are a hundred ways such a film can go wrong. This film gets it right. It gives a variety of perspectives. It matches the visual images with those perspectives. It makes its point without delivering a sermon or presenting an argument. This is how we ought to talk about and think about death and dying. The lectures and the sermons are simply inadequate. The flowers we see, the music we hear, and Kathleen's smile are much more important to our understanding of death.

* There is also a fifty minute version of the film. This film has been endorsed by the Hospice and Palliative Nurses Foundation. If you are interested in purchasing the film you can go to http://www.lessonsforthelivingfilm.com/p/distribution.html. — William L. Blizek